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Beyond Colonial Crumbs

Cambridge School, Identity Politics and Dravidian Movement(s)

M S S Pandian

Cambridge historiography has claimed that politics in India is constituted by factions formed vertically through patron-client nexuses and are motivated by narrow economic and short-term power interests. It conflates the biography of the coercive colonial state and its Indian elite collaborators as the history of colonial India. In this article the author develops a critique of the Cambridge school by expanding the gamut of the political so as to include the mobilisation of alternative public spaces by the subalterns of the dravidian movement.

> The public gathers in two kinds of spaces. The first is a space that is public, a place where the public gathers because it has a right to the place; the second is a space that is made public, a place where the public gathers precisely because it doesn't have the right – a place made public by force [Acconci 1990: 901].

'THE great Indian faction', a product of Cambridge school's historiographical practice, has been a subject of much contestation and critical scrutiny. The faction theorists, in their different incarnations, have claimed that politics in India is constituted around factions which are formed vertically through patron-client nexuses (instead of horizontally across shared identities such as class, caste and gender) and are motivated by narrow economic and short-term power interests (instead of commitment to varying ideologies). Critical scholarship on such theorisation has established that it is anchored in structural funcionalist methodology and behaviourist assumptions [Hardiman 1986]. Taking such critiques to more generalised and substantive levels, Ranajit Guha (1992) has shown how the Cambridge school has conflated the biography of the coercive colonial state and its Indian elite collaborators as the history of colonial India. Furthermore, for him, such exclusionary history, given its neo-colonial moorings and by the strategy of silencing anti-colonial and other contestations by the subaltern classes, represents colonialism as a hegemonic system based on the consent of the colonised.

While I draw substantially on these critiques of the Cambridge school, I have a slightly different and a limited agenda in this paper: I intend problematising the Cambridge school's silencing of political subjectivities based on identities such as class, caste, gender and language, in the specific context of their writings on the dravidian movement(s). I hope, through such a critique, one can reposses the political which has been made unavailable for the subaltern classes in the scholarship of the Cambridge school and recuperate inferiorised identities as an important aspect of subaltern politics. This will, to my mind, enable us to construct alternate and combative narratives of the dravidian movement(s).

I begin this paper with an account of how the dravidian movement(s) and caste[1] have been represented in the influential works of two faction theorists, David Washbrook and Christopher Baker; and proceed to establish the limits of their framework through an interrogation of the fissures and slippages in their own texts. In the final section of the paper, I propose an alternate way of seeing, substantially based on the debates around Habermas's by now well known concept of 'public sphere', which may facilitate the writing of the dravidian movement(s)' history from the vantage point of those who are disempowered through inferiorised identities.

I

David Washbrook begins his history of the dravidian movement(s) and the location of castes in the colonial Madras presidency with a paradox. To quote him,

> ...when overt communal conflict appeared [in Madras presidency], it did so in the most remarkable of forms. One community [the non-brahmans], representing 98 per cent of the population and possessing the vast bulk of wealth and political power, denounced another community [the brahmans], which consisted of less than two per cent of the population and was possessed of nothing like the same economic and political resources, for oppressing it [Washbrook 1977:7].

Baker (1974:xi) too begins the history of the dravidian movement(s) with the very same paradox: "...while movements which claimed to protect a minority were a common feature of the new politics of India in this period of councils, ministers, and electorates, it was unusual, if not paradoxical, to find a movement which claimed to defend a majority– a majority which included up to 98 per cent of the population and almost all the men of wealth and influence in local society." The paradox was constructed by foregrounding the poor brahman and the rich and powerful non-brahman, that is, by a critical displacement of caste with class: "...while there were a few brahmans who were rich and powerful, the majority, if it is possible to generalise at all, were employed in occupations that were essentially menial – as cooks, scribes and religious functionaries – and could be purchased by the wealth of other castes for a few coins or a broken coconut" [Baker 1974:29].

As Washbrook and Baker progress with their argumentation, what looks like a paradox dissolves into a non-problem: caste identity turns out to be an illegitimate candidate for political history. This is achieved through a series of methodological moves which, at one level, reinscribe the relationship between the brahman and the non-brahman as non-antagonistic, and, at another level, represent different castes as fragmented on the basis of interests which are not located in caste identities themselves.

Let us begin with the manner in which the relationship between the brahman and the non-brahman is represented in the scholarship of the Cambridge school. Here, Washbrook and Baker invest the so-called 'sanskritising' desire of the non-brahman castes with primacy and deploy the same to signify the relationship between the non-brahman and the brahman as devoid of antagonism:

> ...any attempt to attach social and cultural dimensions to the non-brahman cause ran immediately up against the dilemma over *popular attitude* to the brahman. *A good many* of the non-brahmans in south India accepted the brahmanical code and brahmanical behaviour as the model of ritual purity. *Many* articulated their wish to rise up the social scale by adjusting their customs and habits to those practised by brahmans, and *many* expressed their own, exalted view of their status by demanding to be called brahmans [Baker 1976:29; emphasis mine].

As Washbrook would put it, "The social models which [non-brahman] magnates tended to emulate were, if not actually brahmanic, at least placed within a brahman dominated hierarchy" (1977:282).[2] According to him, in contexts where the brahman was unworthy of emulation, he was either ignored or kept as a dependent, all of which subverted any possibility of antagonism:

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> To our interpretation the political division of society into brahman and non-brahman makes *no obvious sense... this lack of antagonism is not surprising* when it is remembered that brahmans supplied status legitimacy to most of the groups of state-level culture but had little contact, and were ignored, by the vast majority of local-level cultural groups; nor when it is recalled that even in their contact with most other state-level groups, brahman priests were usually poor dependents who either did what they were told or starved [Washbrook 1977:274; emphasis mine].

What is more, such non-antagonism between the brahman and the non-brahman was furthered by the very nature of the caste system itself, which, according to Washbrook, is flexible. Referring to the upward mobile non-Brahmin groups, he notes, "The character of economic and educational change meant that there was no general pressure on the status categories of the existing social hierarchy. The flexibility of the caste system itself, however, also took much of the steam out of communal politics" (1977:128).

If antagonism between the non-brahman and the brahman was non-existent, caste identity itself was more a fiction than fact. Washbrook finds caste identity to have been always already fragmented; and when he reassembles the fragments, he arrives at 'inter-communal' blocks forged on the basis of patron-client nexuses and instrumental reason:

> as in the case of artisans and workmen... compact local units of caste among 'service' groups were broken by economic ties with outsiders. Lawyers had to find members of other communities to give them cases, clerks and *gumastahs* needed employment with brokers and contractors who seldom were of their caste, and lower government servants had to rely on the co-operation of various local notables. Very rarely were these 'service' groups free to take political action as communities. In Madurai in the early 1880s, for example, there was a storm of protest over an aspect of municipal government from the area of the town in which most of the brahman clerks and lawyers lived. A Ratepayers Association was formed to campaign at the impending elections for the protection of brahman religious privileges. Yet, when the votes were counted, it became clear that the brahmans were unable to poll a majority even in the ward in which they formed most of the voters. A merchant-financier, living in another part of the town was returned as their candidate. It was also in Madura in 1915 and 1917 that K M Alladin Rowther, the notorious Muslim criminal, was elected from the same brahman-dominated constituency... [Washbrook 1977:138].

For the Cambridge schsool, these day-to-day transactions among the members of different castes and the 'cross-communal' loyalties invalidate caste identity as such as a category of the political: "If they [castes] are to be regarded as political communities, the nature of their union is better understood by the metaphysician than by the political historian" [Washbrook 1977:127]. Thus, caste becomes merely an idea without any real existence.[3]

The metaphysical of the Cambridge school refuses to retreat from the political: caste identity was enunciated with vigour as an unifying category in the political discourse of the times. Here, the Cambridge school employs a different strategy to paralyse caste identity. First of all, after reducing caste as a figment of imagination, they set up a conceptual barrier between the universe of ideas and the universe of politics: "What is interesting to political history is *not* the *ideational* antecedents of the movement but the contemporary processes" [Washbrook 1977:287; emphasis mine]. Given this, political history should devalue what is uttered (that is, enunciation of ideas) by freeing it from what is achieved (that is, outcome), which alone is designated as political. For instance, referring to the Justice Party, Washbrook notes, "A large part of the non-brahman propaganda was written and performed by the leading Madras civilians; and it ought to be judged more by what it was meant to achieve than by what it appears to say" (1977:296-97). "What it was meant to achieve" is, of course, deduced from what was supposed to have been achieved.

Such conceptual separation of ideas from politics is legitimised by privileging certain instrumental reasoning. That is, for the Cambridge historians, ideas are mere means for the magnate-patrons and their publicist-clients to further their narrow interests:

> In the area of public activity also, the magnate managed to preserve himself. Of course, it was usually with the support of magnate patrons that western-educated publicists financed their various associations, presses and tract societies. In these they were seldom more than the agents of magnate interests. Their endeavours were intended to highlight their patrons at least as much as themselves. That is not to deny the intrinsic importance of the new ideas expressed in reformist, revivalist and nationalist circles, which were the result of change in the educated community. But political history must deal more with the extent of influence and the effect of ideas than with the character of doctrines [Washbrook 1977:123].

Explicating further on the 'influence and the effect of ideas', Washbrook argues that enunciation of ideas simply translates itself into 'manpower' to settle factional disputes among magnate-patrons: "Cultural movements, *logically independent of politics,* were dragged into political life because they provided a pre-existing organisation which was valuable in raising manpower" (1977:278; emphasis mine); and "...the fact that these cultural and religious movements were politicised in response to factional struggles implies that, once the factional alignments or tactics changed, they could be depoliticised" (1977:251).

Baker echoes the same view when he writes,

> On closer inspection it is clear that these protestations did not mean that the rural population was being mobilised in communal blocks by caste leaders. In each case the local rural bosses were moving in to grasp the new opportunities of the rural boards and rural franchise for themselves and it was often useful for those displaced by this movement to cry out that they were the butt of communal campaign [Baker 1976:117].

Thus, the discursive formations around caste identities lack a will of its own; they become political only when appropriated by the elites to further their factional interests. In other situations, they dwell in the realm of the cultural or the social which has nothing to do with politics.[4]

In short, the disavowal of caste identity as part of the political is complete in the writings of the Cambridge school. If fragmentation of different castes denies caste the status of caste-in-itself, the way in which caste identity was supposed to have been invoked in colonial Tamil Nadu denies it the status of caste-for-itself. Caste identity is thus out in the cold with no political past or future.

Let us now turn to how the Cambridge school writes the dravidian movement(s) within this scheme of reasoning. The Justice party component of the dravidian movement(s), which among other things sought reservations for the non-brahmans in government employment and in the membership to legislative council and other bodies, turned out to be the easiest strand to be explained away by the logic of instrumental reasoning. For them, it was true that the Justice party "spread a wave of racial hatred across the presidency and threatened to tear southern society apart into mutually antagonistic political communities" [Washbrook 1977:1]. But in fact it was a threat which did not actualise itself:

> ...its [Justice party] attempts to erect a social and political philosophy often seemed confused and self-contradictory. In the period 1916-20, this did not help the non-brahman cause to develop into a mass movement. Its newspapers never gained a wide readership and were constantly in financial difficulties. Few branch associations were formed and even some of them had disappeared before the legislative elections in 1920 [Baker 1976:30].

Thus, the non-brahmanism enunciated by the Justice party was an idea without impact. It was empty of ideological substance and hence counterfeit.

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Then, the invocation of non-brahmanism served the non-ideological (!) practical ends of the Justicites. If Baker (1976 :62) writes that "The Justice leaders had... acquired a patronage bank. In many cases nominations to local bodies, temple committees and other boards were used to court MLCs and to build up a party of men obliged to the ministers in the legislative council," Washbrook's conclusion is no different. For him, "...it [Justice party] represented not so much an attack on brahmans' political power as pressure on those occupations and positions in magnate network... which brahmans filled in large numbers" (1977:275).

Thus, the Justice party was a group of western educated men who used non-brahmanism in a non-ideological/ instrumental fashion to gain access to the patronage of the colonial state. As Washbrook sums up colourfully,

> They [Justice party leaders] argued that their challenge was solely towards the secular, political position which brahmans had attained. Yet, once the brahman's spiritual role has been stripped from him, how can he remain a brahman in any meaningful sense? What the Justice party really objected to was the political position of certain individuals who *happened to be* brahmans... [Washbrook 1977:279; emphasis mine].

The other component of the dravidian movement(s) in the colonial Tamil Nadu was the self-respect movement led by E V Ramasamy. The movement, as a policy, did not take part in such processes of politics which were institutionalised by the colonial state in the form of district boards, legislative council, and elections. Simultaneously, its propagandist energy which problematised caste, religion and gender, could not be easily fitted into the category of patron-sponsored publicists. Thus, the self-respect movement occupied the space which is designated by the Cambridge school as the social/the cultural and not the political. Given this, the history of the movement was constituted in the writings of the Cambridge school primarily by its absence.[5]

However, the self-respect movement surfaced in their accounts, but mostly for reasons other than itself. Washbrook, for instance, allows the movement a brief entry in his text where it serves as a mere heuristic device to affirm the Justice party as being devoid of any ideological foundation:

> ...it would be impossible to connect the non-brahman movement of the 1912 to the anti-religious Tamil self-respect movement of the later 1920s... The self-respect movement rested on the support of these elements of local level culture which were slowly being drawn into the regional level cultures... when, from the 1920s, the self-respect movement began to emerge, it attacked all groups of state-level culture, brahmans and non-brahmans alike, and thus made enemies of the high-caste leaders of the non-brahman movement of the earlier period. In social composition, practical aims and doctrines, the non-brahman and self-respect movements were as different as chalk and cheese [Washbrook 1977:278].

Baker gives a slightly longer account of the movement, perhaps because it took place exactly during the period of his study. He writes,

> in the late 1920s it [self-respect movement] had gained notoriety through attempts to force the entry of depressed castes into temples and through public ridicule of Hindu texts which, the self-respecters argued, promoted an oppressive brahmanical code, and they had gained considerable support through a series of carefully staged conferences. Yet their dependence on the patronage of certain leading Justicite politicians had ensured that the movement's radicalism remained mostly rhetorical. In the 1930s, however, the movement took deeper root in some of the towns that were being most deeply disturbed by economic change... At its annual conference in May 1930 at Erode, the movement acquired a programme which went beyond the attack on priestcraft and religious obscurantism and included equal civil rights for depressed castes and for women and measures to redistribute wealth within society... In 1932, he [Periyar E V Ramasamy] visited Europe and Russia and returned, to the astonishment and horror of his old Justicite friends, as a fervent bolshevik. He preached revolution throughout Tamilnad, erected a 'Stalin Hall' to house a self-respect conference in Coimbatore, and gave the Self-Respect movement the litany that 'capitalism, supersition, caste distinctions and untouchability must be rooted out'. In 1934, government started to bring him to heel. They jailed him for a seditious article which, among other things, accused the Justice ministers of 'sharing the spoils' of government, arrested him again for conniving in the publication of a revolutionary pamphlet, and when they started in early 1935 to mop up all pinkish organisations in the province, forced him to a recantation of his bolshevik views [Baker 1976:192-93].

For Baker, this trajectory of events which marked the career of the self-respect movement was merely a product of the disturbed times produced by the great depression and the consequent disruptions in patron-client nexuses.

II

Our critique of the Cambridge school's mode of invalidating caste identities as part of the political and the resultant delimiting narrative of the dravidian movement(s) has to begin with an understanding of how far the voices of the participants in history are allowed to resonate its narratives. In other words, following Renato Rosaldo's (1990:104) critique of E P Thompson, our question is, "...whether central concepts [in our case, used by the Cambridge historians] belong to the author or to the agents of historical change." As we have seen earlier, the historiography of the Cambridge school devalued what was enunciated by the participants in history and instead deduced their intentions from the so-called outcomes of history. That is, utterances are denied the status of conscious acts and are treated as though they are without any autonomous domain of influence. Moreover, outcomes become outcomes only if they meet the requirement of instrumental reason. The implication of such mode of history writing is not difficult to discern. By paralysing the voices of the participants in history, it leaves no space for them to represent themselves [O'Haulon 1985:307]. In other words, there can be no more histories other than what the Cambridge school designates as history.

Despite such theoretical closures and totalising impulse, the Cambridge historians' own writings are full of fissures and slippages which give away the surplus of historical processes which their framework could not accommodate and hence erased or written out. This surplus of history which awkwardly surfaces in their texts, only to be suppressed with swiftness, offer us the limits of their historiographical practice.

Let us first begin with how the Cambridge school expels caste identities from their accounts. As we have noted, their first move towards this was to reinscribe the relationship between the brahman and the non-brahman as non-antagonistic by means of foregrounding and privileging the non-brahman's desire to sanskritise. However, as they proceed with their story, what is represented as non-antagonism refuses that characterisation and articulates itself in opposite terms:

> All members of the western-educated community now were placed in the same career structure and single lines of division between them could split the presidency. That these lines might come to mark a brahman/non-brahman division is suggested by a common grievance which all educated non-brahmans shared against brahmans. Their accredited social position was disproportionately low for, although they were performing the same secular roles as brahmans, they were seldom accorded the same ritual and social prestige. Niggling complaints against brahman arrogance, which no doubt could have been heard in separate localities before, began to creep into the provincial press [Washbrook 1977:280-81].

Here, Washbrook's account, for example, coheres with the account of the Justices themselves. That is, even their advancement

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in education and employment did not subvert their inferiorised identity:

> Many are the non-entities that live by eating the bread and wearing the clothes we give them and yet call us Sudras without any difference... All our sastras declare that there is but one Sami (God). But in our Dravida Country all Brahmins are samis (Gods). The man who, in hotels, cooks and serves our meal is a sami; the man who supplies drinking water on the railway platform is a sami; the man who sells sweets is a sami and the man who cringes for alms is also a sami...There is no reason whatever to call an idiotic and obstinate Brahman a sami. Therefore let our students and other Tamilians give up from today the bad practice of greeting the Brahman as sami [*Dravidian*, July 12, 1917, quoted in Rajaraman 1988:60].

Washbrook was quick to marginalise such possibility of brahman-non-brahman antagonism, which, at a weaker moment of the text, almost allowed the Justicites to speak for themselves. Washbrook imme-diately invokes images of non-anta-gonism and notes, "The importance of this union of complaint, however, ought not to be over-emphasised. It is not necessary to like someone in order to work with him, and most of the people who were making the complaints were in fact working with brahmans and were tied to the same magnate networks as brahmans." Thus, the "union of complaint" of the non-brahmans could not find their elaboration within the framework of the Cambridge school and awaits its history outside.

The second critical move of the Cambridge school in invalidating caste identity is through a representation of caste as irredeemably fragmented. We have already seen this in detail. But, as Washbrook proceeds to establish the so-called non-antagonism between the brahman and the non-brahman as a generalised feature of caste system as such in colonial Tamil Nadu, his tightly woven argumentation of fragmented castes hits its limits. He flounders when he notes, "...The majority of Southern sub-regional *varna* were gathered in and around the Sudra Sanskritic *varna*; Thus social mobility between them was possible without crossing any very obvious and contentious ritual gap" [Washbrook 1977:129]. However, for him, this sudra identity in no sense signifies the possibility of caste being an unifying identity. He displaces such possibility by reading once again non-antagonism and fragmentation there: "In Madras, more than anywhere else in India, small groups were able to raise their effective social status without causing disturbance to the prevailing status structure and without mobilising other groups or endogamous units either in the status categories which they were leaving or in those which they were entering" (1977:129). Washbrook's evasion of the unifying dimension of sudra identity salvages the Cambridge school's denial of horizontal unities in Indian politics. Despite this evasion, it was indeed the inferiorised sudra identity which constituted the basis for the mobilisation of the non-brahman by the dravidian movement(s). While the Justice party recognised that "Many are the non-entities that live by eating the bread and wearing the clothes we give them and yet call us sudras...", it became a keyword, perhaps the most important keyword, in the self-respect movement's discourse on caste. That history of possible unity based on caste identities, which is consciously written out by the Cambridge school, needs to be written in.

The third move of the Cambridge historians towards disinvesting identities of substance is to denude the political of the influence of ideas. They, as we have noted earlier, conceptually separate the social and the cultural from the political; and ghettoise ideas in the former. As the Cambridge school's narrative of history unfolds, the separation of spheres, however, comes under strain and sets the limits for what could be their version of history; and the repressed ideas return surreptitiously. An interesting illustration here will be Washbrook's portrayal of G Subramania Iyer's political career:

> G Subramania Iyer had been a prominent nationalist agitator in the 1870s and 1880s... But he had quarrelled with his colleagues over social reform and had virtually outcasted himself by allowing his widowed daughter to remarry. As a result he had been excluded from the inner sanctum of Mylapore, he had failed to be made a Congress president - which his work for the early Congress deserved - and he had been unable to enter the tight world of legislative council and bureaucratic politics. Through the 1890s and early 1900s, he remained a penurious publicist, while his previous associates became powerful politicians [Washbrook 1977:245].

Thus, one of the most promising members of the Mylapore faction lost his share of colonial patronage for taking up social reform. In other words, his marginalisation in the Cambridge school's version of the political is a result of his stance in the so-called social. But Washbrook has to bypass such interrelationship between the so-called social and the political so as to keep his framework intact, and he does. Instead of exploring the interface between the social and the political, he displaces one's attention on to Iyer's later political style: "In 1907, he aimed his polemics against Mylapore and drew a following from young and poor members of the intelligentsia, students, mill workers, 'jutkawallahs' and other similarly frustrated elements..." [Washbrook 1977:245].

While what Washbrook displaces or does not analyse about Subramania Iyer tells us about the need to write a different history by accommodating the role of ideas and breaching the boundary between the social and the political, what he writes of Iyer's political style too affirms the need for a different history. That is the history which was not informed by Cambridge school's instrumental reasoning alone, but also informed by the politics of jutkawallahs et al, who are disparagingly characterised as people without any political agency, "Jutkawallahs, subject to constant police harassment, factory hands, in the difficult state of assimilation into an urban proletariat, and students, without material worries, could be drawn into violent demonstrations *without much difficulty and particular cause*" [Washbrook 1977:249; emphasis mine].

III

There are voices within the Cambridge historians' texts which are kept subordinated and await articulation and elaboration. These voices viewed caste identity as sites of oppression and hence of unity. To recover these voices is to recover the surplus of history which the Cambridge school's historiography shuts out.

The first move towards recovering these voices is to have a critical understanding of the authorised colonial public sphere, which is valorised by the Cambridge school as the site of the political. Of colonial south India, for instance, Washbrook writes,

> 'Government' was omnipresent in the life of colonial South India. Whether we examine the newspapers, the letters, the autobiographies, the pamphlets or the books of the period, repeatedly we find references to the power, promise and peculiarities of the entity known as government. The avaricious begged its favour, the ambitious its confidence, the pious its protection and the nationalists its self-destruction [Washbrook 1977:23].

Similarly, for Baker, his period of study is a period of "councils, ministers, and electorates" (1976:xi).

Despite such descriptions by the Cambridge school which foregrounds the colonial public sphere, the government-native interaction under colonialism did not and could not approximate anywhere close to even the bourgeois public sphere, 'a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion' [Habermas 1974: 49]. First of all, this sphere of politics was based on the denial of citizenship for the colonised, a necessary condition for colonialism as a system of domination to sustain itself. Given this, the authorised colonial public sphere was confined to a thin layer of the colonised, that is, sections of the indigenous elite. Take for example, the legislative council election of 1920 in Madras province. Even according to Baker, 'In any event it did not take many votes to win an

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election. A million and a quarter qualified for the franchise... and these were divided into 25 district constituencies. The turn-out in rural areas was very low, averaging 23.8 per cent throughout the province, and thus three to four thousand votes were enough for victory. The best strategy for a candidate was to win the support of men who could command many votes in a locality...' (1976:35-36).[6] And even this elite was rendered largely inarticulate by means of colonial laws such as the press acts.

As much as the colonial public sphere was a narrowly constituted sphere based on wealth and education, it too was constitued by the logic of co-option. Washbrook's neo-colonial reading of this sphere brings this out clearly: 'By the 1910s, the classic colonial model of imperial master and native subject was rapidly losing its appropriateness in the context of the Madras state system. Indians were involved actively as well as passively in the highest processes of government' (1977:61).

The colonial public sphere was restricted in its scope and substance not merely because of the dynamics of colonialism, but also by the very character of the indigenous elite who participated in it. Without being informed by notions of substantive citizenship, it was an elite who were, by and large, unwilling to relinquish their traditional modes of semi-feudal authority, and hence failed to speak for a broader public: "The upper castes, especially the Brahmins found that their intelligence and application brought them rich rewards but at the same time did not entail any obligation which would run counter to their traditional ways of living. They could live comfortably [uncomfortably?] in two worlds, the secularised, modernised atmosphere of their places of work which did not affect their everyday domestic and social life. The law along with teaching and the civil service were professions which they could well adopt and yet not infringe their caste and ritual prohibitions" [Srinivasan 1970:184; see also Pandian 1994:2-4].[7]

The implication of this dual existence of the elite participants in the colonial public sphere can be understood in terms of what Nancy Fraser (1992:131-32) writes about the private-public divide: "The rhetoric of domestic privacy would exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalising and/or familialising them; it casts these as private, domestic or personal, familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters. The rhetoric of economic privacy, in contrast, would exclude some issues and interests from public debate by economising them; the issues in question here are cast as impersonal market imperatives... In both cases, the result is to enclave certain matters in specialised discursive arenas and thereby to shield them from broadly based debate and contestation. This usually works to the advantage of dominant groups and individuals and to the disadvantage of their subordinates." In the context of political elites in colonial Tamil Nadu, the privacy was not merely domestic or economic, but more inclusive so as to accommodate issues of religious and caste practices; and hence its disempowering implications were more acute and expansive.

Importantly, this already restricted and qualitatively insubstantive colonial public sphere was further narrowed – this time, discursively – by the Cambridge school. The contestations and alternate points of view which got expressed, in whatever limited manner, in this sphere were erased by merely recruiting those events, which can be interpreted by means of instrumental reasoning, as political, and by denying any validity to participants' self-representations. Thus, the sphere was represented as homogeneous, with its tensions being characterised as nothing other than unprincipled scramble for colonial patronage. We shall return to this point a little later.

The problem of confining the political to this authorised colonial public sphere by the Cambridge school will become evident as we compare it with bourgeois liberal public sphere of the west, which was founded on a more accommodative (though by no means free from problems) notion of citizenship compared to the colonial situation. The point to be underscored here is that, even the bourgeois public sphere could not accommodate the politics of the subordinated. For example, Fraser, in a sympathetic critique of Habermas, notes, "...the problem is not only that Habermas idealises the liberal public sphere but he fails to examine other, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres. Or rather, it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealising the liberal public sphere" [Fraser 1992:115; see also Eley 1990 and 1992]. Proceeding further, she elaborates her point thus: "... members of subordinate social groups – women, workers, people of colour, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identity, interests and needs" [Fraser 1992:123]. One need not belabour the point that this critique of the bourgeoise public sphere will apply, in a more acute fashion, to the colonial public sphere, which is qualitatively and otherwise restricted in scope, under the domination of the colonial state and based on the denial of citizenship to the colonised. In the rest of the article, I will suggest how the category of subaltern counterpublic can recover those histories of caste identities and of dravidian movement(s), which fell victim to Cambridge school's historiography.

Our explorations into the histories and the politics of subaltern counterpublics, which are rendered voiceless by the Cambridge historians by *assuming* their politics as that of clients without will, has to begin outside the colonial public sphere.[8] To step outside the colonial sphere which was institutionalised in "councils, ministers and electorates", is to step into a sphere saturated with the politics of everyday life, where caste, among other inferiorised identities, was experienced. It was a sphere populated with 'agraharams' which denied access even to depressed class members of the legislative council [Chandrababu 1993:4]; temples which kept lower caste devotees either outside or at a distance [Hardgrave 1969:30, 121-5]; railway restaurants which had separate dining arrangement for brahmans (as late as 1941); hotels which did not entertain non-brahmans; private buses which did not permit depressed classes to travel [Chandrababu 1993:73,83]; men who, given their lower caste status, were denied the "right to ride a bicycle on the *public* street of the village, to eat in the coffee hotel, to conduct marriage procession, and often even for a presumptuous... boy to attend the village school [Hardgrave 1969:160; emphasis mine]. Thus, in this domain, caste as well as other inferiorised identities were inescapably present as experience.[9] We may mention here, the self-respect movement functioned exactly in such a domain outside the authorised colonial public sphere. As a Congress weekly *Desabandu* put it in 1929:

> Everyday the nuisance created by the self-respecters increases beyond tolerance. In trains, hotels, river and tank-beds, on the roads and everywhere they seem to be active. They have been charging in abusive language the Brahmans, religions, temples, idol worship, incarnations, *puranas* and *itihasas* and... religious marks or symbols [Chandrababu 1993:132].

And the public speeches, pamphlets, literature and newspapers of the self-respecters spoke incessantly of experience of caste oppression, which is in sharp contrast to Washbrook and Baker who found government everywhere. Recovering such politics of experience will be our first move towards recovering identities as part of the political.

But experiences of oppression do not in themselves automatically constitute a public based on a common identity; it is instead formed through multiple and complex mediations. Writing of public sphere, Eley gives us a feel of such mediations:

> The public sphere ... derived only partly from the conscious demands of reformers and their articulation into government. More fundamentally, it presumed the prior

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transformation of social relations, their condensation into new institutional arrangements and the generation of new social, cultural and political discourse around this changing environment. In this sense, conscious and programmatic political impulses emerged most strongly where underlying processes of social development were reshaping the overall context of social communication. The public sphere presupposed this larger accumulation of socio-cultural change [Eley 1990:14].

Such conceptualisation affirms a number of things which are denied by Cambridge historians. Firstly, it collapses the separation between the political and the socio-cultural and establishes their interdependence as part of a wider notion of the political. Second, it shows that identities are not pre-given, but are constituted over time through a range of processes. In other words, one has to write the histories of how identities are formed as part of the political, instead of looking for them as pre-existing categories of politics – as Cambridge historians have done in denying validity to caste. Finally, it recovers the enunciation of ideas as an important part of publics as well as of the process of such publics being constituted.

Within this conceptualisation of how experiences of oppression, through complex mediations of words and deeds, arrive at subaltern counterpublics, we can now address a range of questions about caste identities and the history of the dravidian movement(s), which have been silenced by Cambridge historians. For instance, if Baker and Washbrook constitute the history of the self-respect movement primarily by its absence, it is now possible to unravel the story of how the movement began its campaign against brahmanism by working initially through associations of different castes, attempted with time a non-brahman front on the basis of the common sudra identity, and finally arrived at a critique of caste system as such [Kesavan 1990:79-81], and how its campaign was carried to even small towns and villages through numerous journals such as *Kudi Arasu*, *Revolt*, *Vedikundu*, *Tamilan*, *Kumaran*, *Puthuvai Murasu*, *Chandamarutham*, and *Suyamariyathai Thondan* [Kesavan 1990:128], countless books and pamphlets which included translations of Robert Ingersoll's rationalist/positivist writings and the publications of the London rationalist association [Chandrababu 1993:131-35, 149], staging of plays (ibid:127-29), a battery of public speakers whose skill is much remembered and spoken of even today, and reading rooms and gymnasia located in different parts of the Tamil-speaking areas. It will, among other things, be a history of utterances whose materiality is mere fiction for the Cambridge historians. Such recovery of self-representation will give us a different account of the authorised colonial public sphere too. Debates within it will no longer signify merely instrumental reason, but ideology as well. Thus, we can situate the conflicts between the Justice party and the Congress in a broader realm of politics which accommodates ideas as part of the political.

If the Cambridge school fails to find caste identities because it treats them as pre-given, its privileging of incomplete mobilisation based on caste identities (caste as fragmented) as a means to represent caste as non-political, too would get a different reading. Here, one needs to bear in mind that one is talking of publics and not communities:

> '...the concept of public differs from that of a community. "Community" suggests a bounded and fairly homogeneous group, and it often connotes consensus. "Public," in contrast, emphasises discursive interaction that is in principle unbounded and open-ended, and this in turn implies a plurality of perspectives. Thus, the idea of a public can accommodate internal differences, antagonisms and debates better than that of a community [Fraser 1992:141n].

This open-endedness of publics basically means that they not only unify participants towards a consensus, but also simultaneously allow for dissensions. In publics which are constituted on the basis of specific identities, these dissension will, at an important level, be based on the problems arising out of the criss-crossing of several identities which define the participants contingently in the publics – caste, class, gender, language etc. In short, publics will ever be marked by fragmenting and unifying tendencies and the mobilisation will always remain incomplete. This site of incompleteness will be the site to explore the totalising or non-totalising character of publics in terms of how inclusive its conception of politics is, rather than a site to deny identities and horizontal mobilisation any role in the political, as has been done by the Cambridge school [Wolpe 1988]. Thus recuperating identities, we can now, in the specific context of the dravidian movement(s), raise issues like how far the sudra identity unified while other identities such as class set the limits for the movement(s); in what manner the politics of the self-respect movement which problematised several identities based on caste, gender and religion, came into conflict with the Justice party, which foregrounded merely the caste identity, and the Congress, which waited for independence to talk at all of inferiorised identities in any substantive manner.

Our account gives the impression that subaltern counterpublics are discrete and have nothing to do with the authorised colonial public sphere – a separation which seems similar to Cambridge school's separation of the social and the political. But they are not: while they are characterised by their own autonomy, they also influence and get influenced by other publics. To quote Nancy Fraser:

> I am emphasising the contestatory function of subaltern counterpublics in stratified societies in part to complicate the issue of separatism. In my view, the concept of a counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes a *publicist* orientation. Insofar as these arenas are *publics*, they are by definition not enclaves, which is not to deny that they are often involuntarily enclaved. After all, to interact discursively as a member of public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas [Fraser 1992:124].

This imbrication of spheres is where one can write the history of contestations and collaborations among different political formations, some functioning in the colonial public sphere and others outside: why E V Ramasamy, the founder of the self-respect movement, supported the policies of the Justice party even as he was then a Congressman; why the self-respect movement attacked the Justice party for its compromises for the sake of power, even while it endorsed a part of its agenda; why the Justice party had to endorse the agenda of the self-respect movement as it was losing grip over the colonial public sphere; why the Justice party leader W P A Soundarapandian, under the influence of E V Ramasamy, took to the programme of 'desanskritising' the already 'sanskritising' Nadars and 'Harijan' welfare... Cambridge school's valorised colonial public sphere becomes thus only a part of the political and not the whole. Further, no longer can one write its history without the history of what lay outside it.

Such dialogics of the publics, subaltern or otherwise, return the mind to history; return inferiorised identities as a basis of contestatory politics; and provide a space to recover the history of the dravidian movement(s) both in and outside the logic of instrumental reason. In other words, what is repressed by the Cambridge historians can now return to the centre-stage of the political. After all, such dialogics was pervasive, as the sigh of relief which M P Sivagnanam, in his role as a Congress harijan seva sangha propagandist, experienced in the early 1930s will show us:

> In those days, the self-respect movement had good influence among the educated harijan youths of Madras slums. Several of them took E V Ramasamy's words as sacred. Because of that, some of them would barge into my meetings and pose questions. They would insist on an answer. Due to these troubles, [I should say] my good opinion of the Self-Respect Movement suffered. But, as I was in charge of Harijan Seva Sangh publicity only for a year, I was relieved from the troubles of the Self Respecters soon [Sivagnanam 1974:85].

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Notes

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1 If I confine myself to caste identity alone in this paper, it is because that alone was taken up for analysis by Washbrook and Baker. This, however, does not mean that the dravidian movement(s) did not address the question of other identities. In fact, the self-respect movement strand of the dravidian movement(s) took up issues of gender, religion, language and nation, apart from caste [see: Anandhi 1991; Pandian 1993; Pickering 1993; and Venkatachalapathy 1990].

2 We may note here that, for Washbrook, 'Brahman dominated hierarchy' is not a problem of power and powerlessness/domination and subordination.

3 Another way in which the Cambridge school reduced caste as a mere idea is by representing it as a fiction invented by the colonial state on the basis of misrecognition of Indian reality [Baker 1976:176; and Washbrook 1977:269]. This has been already pointed out by O'Hanlon (1985:307) in her critique of Cambridge historians.

4 The discursive separation between the social and the political has different biographies in colonial India and these are yet to be recovered in history writing. For instance, while oppositional movements played upon the distinction and self-represented themselves as located in the social so as to guard their politics from the colonial authority, the colonial state, given its ideological baggage of 'civilising' the colonised, responded less ruthlessly towards the so-called social movements.

5 The self-respect movement was launched by E V Ramasamy, after he broke ranks with the Indian National Congress. His active sojourn in the Congress came to an end in November 1925 when two of his resolutions seeking 'communal representation were disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamilnad Congress. Thereafter, he declared his political agenda to be 'no god, no religion, no Congress, and no Brahman'. [Chidamparanar 1983; Visswanathan 1983; and Arooran 1980].

6 Even if one concedes that mobilisation in elections was vertical, the poor turnout figure given by Baker himself shows the limits to such mobilisation. Often, such poor turnout in elections is read as lack of citizenship ideals among the natives. In fact, it was not and they indeed had constituted other sites to articulate their politics [Sabata 1992].

7 Perhaps, Stoddard's following description will give us a flavour of the divided self of the political elite participating in the colonial public sphere:
S Srinivasa Iyengar, Congress President for 1927, returned from Gauhati to be greeted by 'Vedic Brahmans from Mylapore and Triplicane who offered *purnakumbam*...and chanted one or two vedic hymns appropriate to the occasion.' At about the same time S Satyamurti, an important Brahman Congressman and lieutenant of Srinivasa Iyengar, acted as chief defence counsel for the Thiruvana-malai temple authorities against J S Kannapar, editor of the Justice newspaper *Dravidian*. Kannapar charged the Brahman temple authorities with having unlawfully prevented him from entering the temple. M K Achrya, a swarajist member of the Central Legislative Assembly, became involved in the issue of social reform, notably the proposed legislation relating to civil marriages and the age of consent to marriage. During 1926 he had founded the Brahmana Maha Sabha, which actively opposed social reform, and its meetings were chaired frequently by C V Venkataramana Iyengar, yet another prominent Brahman swarajist [Stoddart 1975:53].

8 According to Ranajit Guha (1992:305), 'With the subaltern domain surgically removed from its system, all initiative other than what emanates from the colonisers and their collaborators strictly ruled out, all elements of resistance meticulously expelled from its political processes, *colonialism emerges from this historiography as endowed with a hegemony which was denied to it by history*' [see also Guha 1982:5-6].

9 In foregrounding experience, I have no intention of treating it as prediscursive. As Joan Scott (1991:797) has argued, 'Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident not straightforward; it is always contested and always therefore political... Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects; it instead interrogates the process of their creation...' Such an understanding of experience does not evict what the Cambridge school denigrades as "ideational" or "matter of psychological perceptions" from the analysis of the political, but instead treats it as an important part of the political.

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